

Durham Comprehensive Plan

Frequently Asked Questions

What is a Comprehensive Plan?

A comprehensive plan is the statement by a local government and its citizens about how they want to grow and develop. The term “comprehensive” refers to two aspects of planning. First, it means that the plan covers all of the territory in the City’s and the County’s jurisdictions. Second, it means that the plan deals with all the physical aspects of the community’s growth and development. It guides how the City and County provide public facilities and services and how the City and County regulate new development. A comprehensive plan is long range in scope, focusing on the ultimate needs of the community rather than the pressing concerns of today.

Why should Durham prepare a Comprehensive Plan?

The Durham 2020 Plan was prepared in the early 1990s. The new Durham Comprehensive Plan will utilize the 2000 US Census data and Smart Growth principles to prepare Durham for the next 25 years. The Plan will guide the development into areas that are suitable for growth and assess the demand for public services in order to keep pace with growing needs.

How does the Comprehensive Plan relate to zoning?

An important component of a comprehensive plans is desired patterns of future land use. The Durham Comprehensive Plan will include a Future Land Use Map and policies that describe generally where the community prefers to see future new housing, commercial activity and industries. Elected officials implement the Comprehensive Plan through the rezoning of property. The Comprehensive Plan policies guide zoning decisions by providing a rationale for development choices. Land use designations on the Plan’s Future land Use Map encompass several zones. Rezoning decisions make specific choices from those zones. Zoning decisions are not made at the time the Comprehensive Plan is adopted. Rather, they are generally made at the time land is proposed for development or redevelopment. At that point, Planning staff and elected officials look to the Comprehensive Plan’s policies to see whether a proposed zone is appropriate.

How binding is the Comprehensive Plan on decisions by elected boards?

Under North Carolina law, elected officials may deviate from adopted plans, such as the Comprehensive Plan, though they generally must justify the deviation. In Durham, however, the elected leaders have chosen to ensure that the Comprehensive Plan and rezonings work hand in hand. They have passed resolutions that require that before a rezoning that varies from the Comprehensive Plan can be approved, the Plan itself must be amended. This assures that the Comprehensive Plan retains significance. It also enables elected officials to react to changing economic or physical conditions by changing the Comprehensive Plan and adopting rezonings based on those changes.

How will the Comprehensive Plan be coordinated with the Unified Development Ordinance?

At the same time Durham is updating our Comprehensive Plan, we are also preparing our first Unified Development Ordinance (UDO). The UDO represents a top-to-bottom overhaul and merger of

Durham's zoning and subdivision ordinances. The UDO is utilizing the same tier structure guiding the Comprehensive Plan.

How is the Comprehensive Plan prepared and how long will it take?

Preparing the Durham Comprehensive Plan will take about two years and is expected to be completed in the Spring of 2004. The process will utilize several steps. First, professional planners will translate input from citizens into draft goals, objectives and policies. A team from the City and County Managers' Offices will ensure coordination among various City and County departments, and a citizens' steering committee will provide pragmatic direction and oversight. Citizens will have an opportunity to comment on the draft Plan before the appointed and elected boards consider the draft Plan for adoption. This process has been designed to best utilize the time and energy of citizens and staff to produce a workable Plan for Durham's future.

How much will it cost to prepare the Durham Comprehensive Plan?

The Durham Comprehensive Plan will be prepared using existing City and County staff. Limited expenses will be incurred for printing, postage and advertising of meetings.

How can the public be involved in updating the Comprehensive Plan?

Public involvement in the Comprehensive Plan is critical. The process provides several points for citizen input. A Steering Committee of community leaders is guiding the Plan's development, ensuring that the goals and needs of citizens are reflected in the Plan's goal, objectives, policies and programs. The planning process includes public forums, where citizens can learn about and comment on various Plan elements. Citizens will also be able to learn about the Comprehensive Plan through mail outs, cable TV programs, and a web site dedicated to the Plan. A mailing list will be maintained to ensure that every citizen who expresses an interest is kept informed. Finally, the Durham Planning Commission, the City Council, and the County Board of Commissioners will conduct public hearings as they each consider adoption of the Durham Comprehensive Plan.

What impact will a new Comprehensive Plan have on my property and me?

The Durham Comprehensive Plan will have no immediate impact on individual property owners or properties. However, the various public and private actions to implement the Comprehensive Plan will likely affect property owners. For example, changing the zoning on a property will affect surrounding properties and the new development may change the character of the area. Likewise, the extension of public utilities may open up rural areas for new development that could alter the area's character. Or new transit-oriented development near the regional rail line may affect in-town neighborhoods. For the entire community, a new Comprehensive Plan will ensure that all of these changes are managed in a way to preserve the natural environment, protect existing development and minimize future public costs.

